

Taliban, opposition describe fierce battle around key city

JABAL SARAJ, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghan opposition forces said Thursday they were advancing steadily toward the key northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif with the help of round-the-clock U.S. bombing. The ruling Taliban, however, said they pushed back several opposition attacks.

Both sides said fighting was intense south of Mazar-e-Sharif, which the Taliban seized from the opposition northern alliance in 1998. An opposition victory would allow it to open a supply corridor from Uzbekistan and direct troops toward Taliban strongholds further south.

U.S. jets also struck targets Thursday afternoon along the front lines north of the capital, Kabul, bombing Taliban positions around the town Qarabagh and three other Taliban-controlled villages.

Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of the anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan, said Thursday that the United States is interested in Mazar-e-Sharif because it could provide a land bridge to Uzbekistan. Humanitarian and other supplies could move along that route, he said.

"I have seen reported by many in the media that this is a great gunfight going on in the vicinity of Mazar-e-Sharif," he



An Afghan man prays at a relative's funeral in a mosque in Charikar, 21 miles north of Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday.

said. "It's a bit early for us to characterize this as the success ... but yes, there is a big fight going on in the vicinity."

The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press reported that warplanes conducted 27 bombing raids in the western province of Herat and targeted the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban headquarters.

North of Kabul, witnesses said U.S. jets and at least one B-52 bomber dropped dozens of

bombs on Taliban lines. Opposition spokesman Bismillah Khan said there were no immediate plans for an offensive in that area.

Huge plumes of smoke billowed from Taliban positions, which did not fire anti-aircraft guns as they have on past bombing runs. It was unclear whether the guns had been knocked out or whether the Taliban were saving their ammunition.

Most of the military activity, however, has now shifted to the far north of the country around Mazar-e-Sharif and northeastern Takhar province on the border with Tajikistan.

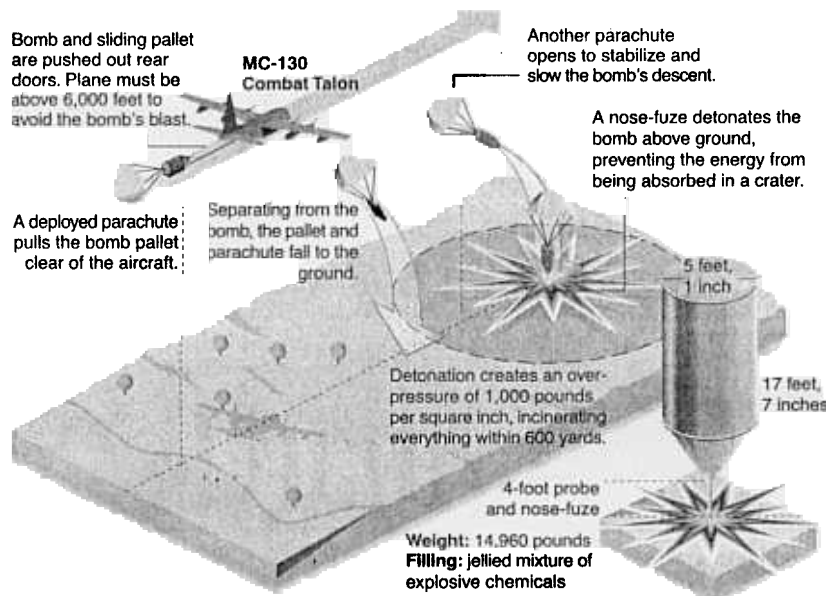
Pentagon officials reported Wednesday that the opposition northern alliance appeared to be making gains south of Mazar-e-Sharif in fluid and chaotic fighting, in which anti-Taliban troops charged tanks and armored personnel carriers on horseback.

Mazar-e-Sharif is believed to have a population of about 200,000, although the figure is an estimate since many people were believed to have fled when the Taliban seized the city three years ago.

There are no working telephone links to the city and it is difficult to determine conditions there since the fighting escalated.

Cutting Daisies: America's biggest bomb

Nicknamed "Daisy Cutter," the BLU-82 is the largest conventional bomb in the U.S. inventory. Used in the Gulf War to clear areas in mine fields, it's also been used to clear jungle foliage for helicopter landing zones. Most recently, the BLU-82 has been used in Afghanistan against Taliban troops.



SOURCES: Jane's Information Group; Federation of American Scientists

AP